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Research Note

Teaching Reading Skills to English Language Learners

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Abstract

Reading is considered one of the most important skills that language learners should obtain, especially as it builds vocabulary and leads to lifelong learning and improvement in first and second language skills. This paper not only gives practical suggestions for the classroom, but also emphasizes the importance of both teachers` and students` understanding of the reading process and reading comprehension. Developing students` reading comprehension skills is a challenging but crucial task for educators.

Key words: reading skills, comprehension, specific reading tasks, process

Introduction

Reading is one of the four language skills, and the most important one to master. It is crucial not just for understanding different texts, but also for improving writing skills, and for learning more generally and thus education more broadly. It is also a "requisite for social activities because of email, texting, and numerous Web applications that people use on an everyday basis" (Kilpatrick, Malatesha & Wagner, 2019, p.83). The future of education is a networked future.

A growing number of English Language Learners (ELL) experience more difficulties in reading comprehension than in any other linguistic skill. According to Montes, Botero and Pechtalt (2009, p.55), learners "struggle during the reading process with how to decipher a text in English, grasping isolated bits which, in the end, are not harmonized."

It is also important to distinguish reading in a native language from reading in a foreign language. Students need good reading skills to achieve personal, occupational and professional goals. Students who speak a target language fluently but cannot read and write well are much more likely to experience difficulties in an academic environment than those who speak with a heavy foreign accent but understand written text and write acceptable papers. A research conducted by Stanford University shown that to achieve "oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take 4 to 7 years" (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Students learn to read foreign languages for different reasons, for entertainment, information, research, or for examination. Nunan (1999, p 251) points out Rivers and Temperley (1978, p.187) list of seven main purposes for reading:

1. To obtain information for some purpose or because we are curious about some topic;
2. To obtain instructions on performing some task for work or daily life (e.g., understanding how an appliance works);
3. To act in a play, play a game, or complete a puzzle;

4. To keep in touch with friends by correspondence or to understand business correspondence;
5. To know when or where something will take place or what is available;
6. To know what is happening or has happened (as reported in newspapers, or magazines);
7. For enjoyment or excitement.

Reading for a purpose provides motivation, which is an important aspect of the study process as well as a source of enjoyment for readers. Student motivation is a key factor in successful reading.

What is Reading?

Reading is not a passive process but rather an active one involving the reader in ongoing interaction with the text. Mckee suggests “Reading is both a receptive and active process” (2012, p.45). It is an active process, in which the reader uses various acquired abilities. Also, it is receptive process, in which reader takes out meaning from the spoken or written discourse.

According to Goodman (1971, p.135) “Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game by which reader or any other language user reconstruct a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display” others as “an art”. Reading develops gradually; and the reader does not become fluent suddenly, or immediately”. Goodman’s reader is a fluent and proficient reader who is more suited to an academic setting than a typical ELL who is learning the language only as a life skill. His reader approaches a text with expectations based upon a reader’s knowledge of the subject. As a reader progresses through the material, the reader confirms or revises these expectations and builds further. This confirmation of expectancy is conducted through the extraction of the minimum sampling of the text. Orthographic, syntactic, and semantic clues in the material are used

in the reconstruction of the text. If there is an obvious flaw in the reader's interpretation, the reader may check for the source of the mistake. Words may be processed on the basis of syntactic, or semantic expectancy, or broken down into roots or affixes, or even broken down into speech components. The latter is probably rare for the fluent reader because there will be few unknown words in their vocabulary. "Knowing the meaning of words is obviously crucial for reading comprehension, but the link between vocabulary and reading flows in both directions" (Oakhill, Cain & Carsten, 2015, p.66).

Restructuring is a process in which language learners replace previous strategies with new ones instead of simply using the same reading process more quickly as they become more proficient. As language learners become more fluent and become more skilled in reading, their *errors should be meaning based* because they have automated the components of reading concerned with form. The reader takes advantage of his/her knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and the "real world". Fluent readers use a minimum sampling of the text to derive the meaning by using their real world, language, and reading knowledge as a substitute for all the redundant features of the text. A less skilled reader would probably have to sample much more of the text to obtain the same level of meaning. Moreover, "reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought" (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt & Kamil, 2003, p.6). Success in reading, depends on coordinating a number of different skills and strategies.

Reading as an Active Process

Reading is not a passive process, in which the reader takes something out of the text without effort or merely recognizes what is in the text. It is an active process, in which a reader must make an active contribution by drawing upon and using various acquired abilities concurrently. There are many different types of reading

skills that correspond to the many different reading purposes. Reading is always purposeful, in the sense that any motivation to read a given text is triggered by some individual purpose or task, whether imposed internally or externally, such as test taking. Nunan (1991, p.70) suggests that “reading is a dynamic process in which the text elements interact with other factors outside the text, most particularly with the readers knowledge of the experiential content of the text.” This highlights the need to relate the language being taught to its context. Both L1 and L2 readers are involved in an uphill struggle when actively approaching meaning. On the other hand, decoding different layers of text messages requires much more effort for L2 side due to the fact that in L2 reading there is no complete and absolute understanding.

Critical reading requires teachers to move their students beyond the thorough comprehension stage of reading at which the reader is able to paraphrase the author’s ideas but has not yet made a critical evaluation of those ideas. It requires teachers to encourage students to approach to L2 readings with the same critical judgment they probably exercise when reading in their native language.

Language used to be seen as a system of rules, and the task of language learners was to internalize and absorb these rules by whatever means at their disposal, or more usually in a formal context, at the disposal of the teacher. The ultimate aim of the learner was to approach the target language of the “native language.” Therefore, it was most important for learners to understand and manage the structures of the language, and in this process, understanding of meaning was seen as almost unimportant or secondary.

Nunan suggests that “the realization that language could be analyzed, described, and taught as a system for expressing meanings had a profound effect on language teaching” (2012, p.51), or at least at the levels of syllabus design and textbook writing.

In a traditional approach, the curriculum designer first decides the purpose of the course. The learning texts and tasks are then decided upon, and finally, the means for assessing learners and evaluating the curriculum are established. Classroom teachers are usually given curriculum guidelines or sets of syllabi regulations and are then required to develop their courses. As their immediate focus is on the day-to-day schedule of work with learners in the classroom, their conception of tasks is somewhat different.

Proponents of the communicative approach advocate a learning environment that involves all individuals, both teachers and students, in the cooperative process of setting and achieving goals. The main goal of this approach is “the teaching of communicative competence” (Richards, 2006). It was developed to provide language learners with the ability to use the target language in real-life conditions. An independent student not only uses various skills and strategies on cue but can also determine his/her own purposes for reading, goals and appropriate reading strategies. “Therefore, the communicative approach promoted the idea that social and cultural knowledge were necessary prerequisites for understanding and using linguistic forms” (Basta, 2011, p.126). This approach will produce meaningful and real communication at all levels.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is defined as “a thinking process by which a reader selects facts, information, or ideas from printed materials, determines the meanings the author intended to transmit; decides how they relate to previous knowledge; and judges their appropriateness and worth for meeting the learner’s own objectives” (Veeravagu, et al, 2010, p.206). Comprehension is like the process of building bridges between what is known and the unknown. Learners start with a knowledge framework and attempt to fit new information into it. Reading strategy instruction can help learners to become aware of their

effective (and ineffective) use of strategies and can build reading skills. Most second language learners who are already schooled in a native language, reading comprehension is basically a matter of developing appropriate and efficient comprehension strategies.

Two common reading methods are known as bottom-up and top-down and they take contrary approaches to improving students' reading skills. According to Rayner, Pollatsek, Ashby and Clifton (2012), "models of reading can be characterized as *bottom-up and top-down...*" and these two approaches can be applied to the analysis of reading comprehension as linguistic and nonlinguistic responses to the text. They are both used whenever we read; sometimes one predominates, sometimes the other, but both approaches are needed. Although the reader may be unaware of which approach is activated, both can be adopted as conscious strategies by a reader approaching a difficult text. In order to fully develop students reading skills it is important to give students access to both types of processing.

The Bottom-up Approach

Bottom-up processing happens when readers try to understand language by looking at individual meaning or grammatical characteristics of the most basic units of the texts (words for a reading text), and move from these to trying to understand the whole text. According to Feng (2010, p. 154), "a bottom-up reading model is a reading model that emphasizes the written or printed text, it says that reading is driven by a process that results in meaning (or, in other words, reading is driven by text) and that reading proceeds from part to whole." This means working from smaller units to larger ones.

To make students better readers, teachers first need to raise learners' awareness that it is not necessary to understand every single word in the text. Metaphorically speaking, in seeing only the trees, students may miss the forest

they form. If students' basic strategy is to read slowly, then the teacher should first help students to learn to read quickly. However, no student can be pushed beyond their real capacity. Many English language students have a reading *mental block*, a conviction that every word must be correctly understood and processed in to understand the entire text. Furthermore Nuttall (2005, p. 17) points out that "bottom-up processing can be used as a corrective to tunnel vision (seeing things only from our own limited point of view)."

The Top-down Approach

The main premise of the top-down approach is that the reader rather than the text, is at the heart of the reading process. In top-down processing, readers use their background information, own intellect and past experience to predict the meaning of language. The expectation that readers have predicted will be confirmed or rejected as they read the text. "This processing is different from bottom-up processing as it sees the reading texts as the overall purpose of the text or getting a rough idea of the pattern of the writer's argument" (Nuttall, 2005, p.16). Therefore, the interaction of the reader and the text is central to this process, and readers bring various factors to this interaction, such as their knowledge of the subject, knowledge of and expectations about how language works, motivation, as well as interest in and attitude toward the text.

The assumptions learners make about the world depend on their experience and how their minds have organized the knowledge gained from their experiences. A useful way of thinking about this is provided by *schema theory*.

Schema Theory

A Schema is organized knowledge structure and it is important for comprehending, learning, and remembering. Djuarsa (2016, p.43) notes that "according to schema theory, people make sense of new experiences and the world by activating the mental representations or schemata stored in their memory. New

experiences and information are interpreted according to how it fits into their schemata. Information that does not fit may be misunderstood or miscomprehended.” Therefore, schema theory is based on individual past experience and it guides present understanding or action.

It is important to recognize schemata as a useful concept for understanding how learners can interpret text as text by itself does not carry meaning. It gives *signposts* or clues to the reader who understands the meaning or message of a writer. In the following example, Nuttall (2005, pp.7–8) provides a very good illustration of how learners interpretations depend on schemata activated by the text, and how learners successful understanding depends on whether their schemata are sufficiently similar to the writers.

The bus careered along and ended up in the hedge. Several passengers were hurt. The driver was questioned by the police.

Having a schema about buses, learners assume that the passengers mentioned were in the bus (and not in a car that happened to be there) and that the driver was actually the bus driver, not the driver of another vehicle. Yet, these three sentences do not actually tell us these things: readers are usually making assumptions based on their own experience.

Another component of this bus schema is that buses run on roads; thus, readers assume that the bus was on a road, even though no road is mentioned. The road schema for some readers will include components such as walls, hedges and fences, which mark the edges of a road. Those readers whose experience (road schema) does not include hedges alongside roads will perhaps have difficulty here (the writer assumes that facts and relationships are already in the reader’s mind). Shuying (2013, p.130) confirms that “a text only provides directions for readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge.”

Finally, the driver schema includes the idea that the driver (probably male) is responsible for the safety of the vehicle driven. Hence, learners would not be

surprised if the next sentence related that the driver was arrested, but then the reader learns the following:

She was later congratulated on her quick thinking and skillful handling of the bus when the brakes failed.

A schema grows and changes through readers' lives, not simply from acquiring new experiences, but also from those derived from reading. Therefore, extensive reading is very important. Thus, if readers have the schemata assumed by the writer of the text, they understand what is written. If they do not, they may distort the meaning as they attempt to accommodate written propositions to their own preexisting knowledge structure.

"Reading involves more than utilizing linguistic and decoding skills, the interest, motivation and background knowledge, subcomponents will actually determine, at least in part, the reader's success with a given text" (Alderson, 2000, p.47). The cultural subcomponent includes a good deal of cross-cultural information; more specifically information about the writer's conceptual universe such as what questions, learners have and what values and beliefs they hold. Cultural misunderstandings may occur because these factors differ from culture to culture. Different interpretations of a text will eventually impede reading comprehension. A variety of means are suggested for providing the background information needed for mastery of a foreign language, such as movies, literature, and teachers' own experiences and descriptions of the target culture.

According to Maine and Shields (2015, p.8), "research indicates that the comprehension is best developed in reading contexts that contain elements of ambiguity, engage children and promote dialogue." Therefore, a teacher needs to devise a set of reading strategies and techniques, to adapt to a wide range of academic issues, whether linguistic or nonlinguistic.

Reading Strategies

Most students develop personal strategies to understand what they read. Reading strategies are often taught by teachers and utilized by students to improve reading comprehension. According to Grabe and Stoller (2020, p.10), “reading strategies are most evident and important when readers look for ways to address a problem or a specific goal while reading (usually with more advanced and more challenging texts).”

More proficient readers vary their strategies depending on the nature of the task and the context, while less proficient readers either use fewer strategies to undertake the task or follow ones that are inappropriate for either the task or the context. It is important to note that a task involves not only examination, but also meaning-focused work involving learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language. Therefore, a task entails communicative language use in which the users attention is focused on meaning rather than on linguistic structure.

Schunk (2012, p.322) revealed that “students may learn strategies and apply them effectively yet fail to maintain their use over time or generalize them beyond the instructional setting.” Many factors impede strategy transfer, including not understanding that the one particular strategy may not be appropriate for a different setting, not knowing how to modify a strategies for a different context, believing that strategies are not as useful for improving performance as other factors (e.g., time available), thinking that the learning strategies takes too much effort, or having no opportunity to apply a strategy to new material.

Becoming a strategic reader requires learning sets of strategies that work well in combination to perform tasks or solve common problems. Nunan (1999, p.265–266), Grabe and Stoller (2002, p.83) list the following common strategies used by readers:

1. Having a purpose
2. Previewing

3. Skimming
4. Scanning
5. Clustering
6. Avoiding bad habits
7. Predicting
8. Reading actively
9. Inferring
10. Identifying genres
11. Identifying paragraph structure
12. Identifying sentences
13. Noticing cohesive devices
14. Inferring unknown vocabulary
15. Identifying figurative language
16. Using background knowledge
17. Identifying style and its purpose
18. Evaluating
19. Integrating information
20. Reviewing
21. Reading to present

Using these reading strategies does not typically involve conscious decisions. Strategies are a set of skills that readers have conscious control over but are partially automatic such as skipping a word reader may not know when reading. Reading strategies show how readers make sense of what they read and what they do when they do not understand a text. According to Farrell (2009, p.9)

It is effective to teach reading strategies to ELLs and that students can benefit from such instruction. Strategy instruction also develops student knowledge about the reading process, introduces ELLs to specific strategies, and provides them with opportunities to discuss and practice

strategies while reading. That said, the ultimate goal of reading instruction is not to teach individual reading strategies but rather to develop strategic readers.

All students are different; hence, there is no single method or combination of methods that can teach all students to read successfully. It is best if teachers have a knowledge of different methods for teaching reading and that they are aware of the learning styles and preferences of their learners, so they can create the appropriate balance of methods. As these will allow students to enjoy (or at least feel comfortable with) reading in a foreign language, and to read unfamiliar, different texts without help, at appropriate speed, silently and with enough understanding.

Possible Strategies for Reading

Reading strategies are one of the most important elements for comprehension of the texts, and these strategies are used to help learners focus on reading and to do more than just read the words on a piece of paper. Scrivener (2005, pp. 184–187) suggests a possible top-down route map for a reading lesson, starting with a broad background and overview tasks and moving toward the smaller more detail-focused and language-focused issues.

Pretext: Introduction and lead-in, e.g., get the learner interested in the topic, initial discussion of key themes, make an explicit link between the topic of the text and students' own lives and experiences, focus on important language that will occur in the text.

First task (prereading): e.g., predict from some extracts (an illustration, key words, headlines, etc.), read questions about the text; students compose their own questions.

Text: Tasks to focus on fast reading for gist (skimming): e.g., check text against predictions made beforehand, guess the title from a choice of three options, put events (or illustrations) in the correct order.

Tasks to focus on fast reading for specific details (scanning); e.g., find

single items of information in the text.

Tasks to focus on meaning (general points): e.g., answer questions about meaning, make use of information in the text to do something (make a sketch, fill out a form, find out which picture is being described, etc.), discuss issues, summarize arguments, and compare viewpoints.

Tasks to focus on meaning (finer points, more intensive comprehensive understanding).

Tasks to focus on individual language items: e.g., vocabulary or grammar exercises, use of dictionaries, infer meaning of words from context.

Posttext: Follow-on task: e.g., role-play, debate, writing task (e.g., write a letter in response), personalization (e.g., “Have you ever had an experience like this?”).

Closing: e.g., draw the lesson to a conclusion, tie up loose ends, and review what has been studied and what has been learned.

Possible strategies for the remaining two tasks, i.e., *multiple matching* and *gapped text* need to be reflected upon.

Part one of *multiple matching* includes a one page set of questions either continuous text, a group of short texts or a text divided into sections. In part two, learners have to scan a two-page text: one continuous text or a group of shorter texts or text sections.

Possible ideas for teaching *multiple matching* are as follows:

- Students write questions on a text for their partner, then swap text and Q&A (question and answer)
- Students provide answers within a time limit in pairs/teams
- Students skim read the whole text, ignoring the questions, then, summarize the main points in pairs
- Students underline what they consider to be the most important information

in the questions

- Students circle all the words they do not know and ignore them, then see if they can do the task without those words
- Students see the questions only and have to anticipate what will be in the text

The kinds of texts that are likely to be most suitable for *gapped text* tasks are those with a strong development of ideas and/or texts with a sequence of events. The line of development is always clear in the base text, e.g., key information always appears first in the base text. It should be possible to skim-read the base text and gain an overall picture of the text. It is important for the student to understand the development and organization of the text as this will avoid “careless” mismatches of extracts that focus on events in the text.

Possible ideas for teaching *gapped texts* are as follow:

- Cut up texts, put students into groups; each student receives a piece of paper with a paragraph. Students describe each paragraph and then the group arrange the paragraphs in order
- Students predict the missing content of a gapped text without seeing the missing paragraphs
- Students read the first paragraph of a text and predict what follows
- Students underline reference words and time markers
- Students scan text for general points before the task
- Students distinguish between “actions” and “commentary”
- Students spot paragraphs that do not fit
- Students decide how texts can be gapped

Learners need to learn to recognize and use text structure signaling devices and discourse organization to improve their text comprehension. Text structure signaling involves the use of text signals that connect sentences and parts of sentences together. They “contain structural elements that help guide students

through their reading” (Akhand, Malayeri & Samad, 2011, p.368). These signals include pronouns, definite articles, repetition of words and synonyms, words that highlight informational organization (e.g. first, second, third, however, on the other hand, in contrast), and transition words, phrases, and sentences.

Discourse organization broadly refers to larger units of text, how they are organized and how they can be recognized. Good readers are able to recognize the obvious signaling narrative organization (such as story structure) as well as argumentative for-and-against organization. Boje (2019, p.339) point out “discourse analysis, by contrast, is generally defined as “texts” that are written, spoken or are multimedia texts television and Internet.” All of these textual features of discourse contribute to comprehension, particularly with more difficult texts. Reading comprehension is a complex process that involves many different variables and factors.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that reading is an interactive process that involves linguistic knowledge, such as sound or symbol correspondences, grammatical and real-world knowledge.

Reading is primarily about comprehension and it is one of the most important skills for students to develop and that requires the orchestration of many different skills and abilities. Therefore, the most effective reading program would be composed of instruction in the critical skills and consistent practice in different kinds of reading. In developing reading strategies, there is no single method that suits all learners and teachers should be wary of the “one size fits all” approach and strategy. Teachers have to effectively and systematically alter various methods that will benefit their learners the most. As the students become better readers, they will determine what they read, why they read, and how they read.

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